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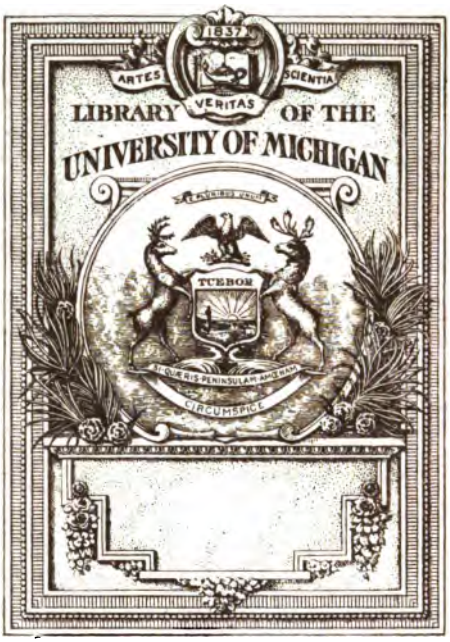
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WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

A Sketch of the New Movement in the Theatre

by

Henry Blackman Sell

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1914

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"The old order changeth, giving place to the new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways
Lest one good custom corrupt the world."

—TENNYSON.

THE AWAKENING

After some two generations of somnolent self-complacency, the fine art of dramatic expression has been once more awakened to living activity; that awakening has developed five types of theatre. The first, distinctly the largest, is the moving picture theatre; the second is the theatre devoted to musical extravaganza; the third is vaudeville; the fourth is frankly given over to farce; and the fifth, smallest in numbers but greatest in definite influence, is the 'art' (artist's) theatre. All of these five types have their individual exponents, good, bad, and indifferent, but we will not concern ourselves with that point in this small sketch.

Each has drawn its share of patronage from the 'commercial,' legitimate and light opera stages (so prosperous during the last forty years) until erstwhile audiences have dwindled to a group so small that managers are rapidly abandoning them for one of the five new fields.

The discriminating theatregoer who has once seen sincere artists working to please themselves can never again be attracted by the old tawdry attempts at 'artistic' effects, and the old overplayed characterizations. The playhouse of yesterday has been completely deserted by the occasional patron whose interest in the drama ceases when he has been respectably entertained; the 'movies' or the vaudeville serves his purpose admirably, and the price suits him better. And as for the much pampered 'tired business man'—he who

'thinks so much during the day' that he must goggle at pretty, hopping 'girlies' in short skirts all evening—the milkwarm naughtiness of the light opera will never again satisfy him after one visit to Mr. Ziegfeld's 'Follies.'

A rapid rearrangement of values is taking place in theatres of every type. That spirit of individuality which led Booth and Irving and Bernhardt to revolt against the traditions of their time is in the movement of today.

WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

The moving pictures, the extravaganza, the vaudeville, and the farce need no explaining; actuated by the basic motive of profit they make a perfectly frank bid for the dollar. At such and such an admission price they offer a certain number of fundamental sensations; one agrees to give you a 'lump in your throat'; another agrees to make you laugh; while still another arrays upon the stage long rows of pretty girls for your ocular delight. The managers of these theatres center their interest on the treasurer's report, and the productions are arranged accordingly.

But around 'the art theatre' there seems to have gathered much misunderstanding. When the playgoer is told that it is not conducted for profit, he hesitates a moment and then, with sudden comprehension, he exclaims, "Ah, yes, how splendid—then you are educating the public taste!"

No better answer seems formulable than the one recently given by Mr. Winthrop Ames, the erstwhile director of the 'New' (now Century) Theatre in New York and, at present, director of the successful New York Little Theatre. "I do not believe that any theatre or any movement in the theatre can or is intended to 'educate' the public. The education of a public begins in the nursery; when a man or woman has reached the age to count as a part of the theatre-going public, his or her taste is formed. Men and women either care for the better things of the drama or they never

will really and honestly care for them. Immediate progress in the art of the theatre depends not upon educating *the* public, but in selecting *a* public. Those who like the better things that the theatre has to offer must be rallied out of the existing general public and slowly unified into a supporting and increasing audience."

"Well," queries the puzzled playgoer, "if they are not working for profit, and they are not working with philanthropic motives, *what is it all about?"*

Stated concretely, the establishment of a separate 'art theatre' is an effort by artists to control the stage once more, for the art of dramatic expression, more than any other fine art, has been for years exploited by those interested only in the box office.

"Yes, yes," knowingly interrupts the playgoer, "but will you please define 'the artist of the stage'?"

This question is always asked and it is most difficult to answer, but, for the purpose in hand, an artist may be described as one whose interest in the excellence of the production is greater than his interest in the remuneration. This does not mean that he, by any means, despises the remuneration, or that he has any silly illusions about 'art for art's sake,' but simply that he is one whose *greater* interest is in the excellence of the production.

Here the playgoer hesitates, for he begins to see why the revolutionists are freeing themselves from the old theatre, but he is dubious about the result.

"And will it be worth while to have the stage restored to the artist? What changes may we, the average patrons of the theatre, expect when the artist has again gained control?"

It will be worth while in terms of sincere work and genuine expression of individuality. We may expect an elimination of the 'star' system, a suppression of over-emotion both in comedy and tragedy, a greater simplicity of action and arrangement, and better and more plays.

"But," he remonstrates, "I have long enjoyed Mr. Warfield, Mrs. Fiske, and many other 'stars.' If you are to eliminate this, what do I gain in return; in short, what are the crimes of the 'star' system?"

The 'star' system fosters the exploitation of personality and the oddities of individuality at the ultimate expense of the play and the cast, and even the star himself. It is practically impossible to have good ensemble in either action or scene when one person is being featured. Further than that, we lose the versatility of the star himself, as he is tied, by the dictates of the box office, to the class of work which pays the largest amount of money, whether that class of work pleases the star and best develops his personality or not.

The interest of the playgoer is now aroused and he continues: "Yes, I see, and what is the simplicity of arrangement I hear so much about?"

This can be explained only by an example. Take, for instance, the court scene in 'The Merchant of Venice.' The action revolves around three characters, *Shylock, Portia* and *The Duke.* Not content with giving us a clear, clean background for each of these characters, and carrying out a simplicity of costume and of scenery which would emphasize the misery of *Shylock,* the dignity of *Portia* and the elegance of *The Duke,* the average stage director must needs go into detail and draw our attention in a thousand direc-

tions, that we may know his great research into everything, from the lions' heads carved on *The Duke's* chair to the oddity of the buttons on *Shylock's* shoes. This cannot but be disconcerting to the beholder, and the simplicity which the modern school stands for eliminates it. By this I do not mean that the stage must be a bare barnlike affair, totally dismantled of the accoutrements of the time, but that we may suggest to the imagination, by broad, carefully studied lines, all that the average 'stage musser' now goes into with such exasperating detail. We might sum up this entire explanation by saying that the modern school stands for that method of arrangement which takes the *bareness* from *simplicity* and the *vulgarity* from *elegance.*

"Yes," interrupts the playgoer, "I had never thought of it in exactly that way before, but it does seem logical. Now, you said something about better plays and more plays. Will this return of the artist to the stage truly foster better plays than are now being produced, and more of them?"

It will, for, with the 'star' system eliminated, as much as it ever can be, and with the terrific expense now attached to detail in production very much minimized, and with the 'star' given a more real valuation, the manager will be braver about embarking on the tempestuous sea of public opinion. The one- and two-act plays that can so easily be produced under this system will, without question, make playwrights feel it in their power to do much more and much better work than heretofore. Few plays really need more than two acts to complete them, and if the usually superfluous third act, as now demanded to give the audience more of the 'star,' could be eliminated, the playwright would

put more enthusiasm into his work. This has been proved beyond argument by the experience of the Irish Players in Dublin, the Horniman Players in Manchester, Granville Barker in London, Gordon Craig in Italy, and so on through the long list of groups and individuals now engaged in the movement.

"And," concludes the playgoer, "in the light of experiments now under way, what is the prospect for the future? Is the movement on the wane, or is the future bright?"

Those who are most closely allied with both the financial and the artistic ends of this work are truly and normally enthusiastic. You will find hardly one who feels that while it is all in its infancy today, there is anything to be discouraged about; in fact, there is everything over which to be encouraged; it is rapidly moving from one city to another, gaining a definite, paying patronage, and we may say as a final word that the 'modern' or 'repertory' movement is destined to revolutionize the entire theatrical business, and that the millennium, when the commercial theatre shall become artistic and the artistic theatre shall become financially upstanding, is well on its way.

THE ART THEATRE

The Art Theatre may be broadly classified under two heads. The first, fathered by Gordon Craig in Italy, and followed by Reinhardt in Germany, Bakst in Russia, and Granville Barker in London, is re-staging the best of the old plays with some new ones. This movement may be phrased as 'plastic drama,' and these men may be called 'imaginists.' The second of these schools, brought into existence by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge in Ireland, Ibsen in Norway, Sudermann and Hauptmann in Germany, Strindberg in Sweden, and Shaw in England, are re-invigorating the folk drama. These people may be classified as 'realists,' and their work phrased as 'thought drama,' or the working out of thought through the medium of text. From these two schools are coming the best ideas and the best motives of the stage today, and their work is gradually culminating in the development of small theatres and groups of individuals interested in the drama, not for profit, nor from any philanthropic sense, but interested in it simply for the sake of the interest. These managers and interested patrons are making a constructive effort to join the forces of these two new schools in the growth of a third school which shall embrace the best of each, but which is yet in such a nebulous state that an exact definition of it cannot be given.

The first of these schools is decidedly hampered by the fact that its ideas and ideals must be worked out with prosaic canvas and paint; consequently it is not making the rapid progress of the second, which is hampered only by the necessity of putting illusive thought into words. It is for this reason that we hear a great deal more of the second and see a great deal more of its work.

THE REALISTS

(1) J. T. Grien, leading a group of actors dissatisfied with the spirit of the 'commercial' theatre, organized the London Independent Theatre about 1894. The venture was unfortunate, but it crystallized the 'repertory movement' idea. Here Miss Horniman and Mr. Yeats were brought together, and she was persuaded by him to furnish the money for an Irish National Theatre in Dublin.

(2) This was called the Abbey Theatre, and is the home of the now-famous Irish Players. When this company was established, Iden Payne was brought from London as director, but it soon became apparent that an Irish National Theatre should be directed by an Irishman, and, after six months of negative results, he returned to London, where he met Miss Horniman, who, being much pleased with his efforts in Dublin, suggested that he use her money for a similar organization in England.

(3) Manchester was chosen; Mr. Payne found actors sympathetic with such a venture, and arranged some splendid attractions which brought much well deserved praise to the Horniman Manchester Players. *En tour* these people visited

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GLASGOW
MANCHESTER
2
3
DUBLIN
5
LIVERPOOL
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BIRMINGHAM
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LONDON

(4) Glasgow, and roused that city to the engineering of its own repertory theatre. While Glasgow was in the first months of the work,

(5) Liverpool, not to be outdone by Manchester and Glasgow, raised the largest sum of money, and secured the longest list of subscribers that any city in the world has thus far contributed to the 'movement.' Stimulated by the success of the Liverpool enterprise,

(6) Birmingham, the last city to raise money, and yet the only one with an active amateur organization, built a theatre. The company ceased as amateurs and now devotes all of its time to the work. This brings us back to

(7) London, where Granville Barker has been working for some time in the 'new' manner of acting, playwriting and scene painting at his own King's Way Theatre.

It will readily be seen that the 'movement' has circled the British Isles, and that it has had its strongholds in the greatest cities.

THE IDEALISTS

Gordon Craig, the son of Ellen Terry, and a member of Sir Henry Irving's company, became dissatisfied with the heavy, unimaginative settings of Sir Henry's productions, and left the company some twenty years ago with the idea of gathering about himself a group of young revolutionists who would help him to re-invigorate imagination in the theatre. He found little or no appreciation of his efforts in England, and after some years of unsuccessful work he went to Florence, Italy, and founded a school of the theatre

where he could have the assistance and discipleship of young artists unhampered by traditional ideas. There he met Reinhardt, an artist of great ability and a clever business man, who assimilated a great many of Craig's ideas and proceeded to Germany to work them out. In Florence, Craig also came into contact with several young Russians who worked under his tutorship and afterwards established the Seagull Theatre in Russia, now recognized as the most important art theatre in the world.

Granville Barker, a producer of note in London, eventually went to Italy, where he was influenced by Craig's work, and, returning to England, he established his own King's Way Theatre and is now working out plans for the re-establishment of the fantasy play and the use of gesture and movement based on the old laws of pantomime.

Another important movement for which Craig has furnished the basic ideas is that instituted by Bakst in establishing a school where only gesture and the movement of the dance shall be used—these taking the place of words.

It will be seen that not only is Gordon Craig the instigator of practically all that is best in the new movement, from a scenic standpoint, but that most of the artists identified with it are direct pupils of his, and it may be a source of wonderment that he has not received more credit for what has been done. We hear the name of Reinhardt, Bakst, or Barker three times to every once of Craig, and there seems to be just one answer to this question: Craig is not a practical man in his work nor a business man in his dealings with others, and in consequence he gets little credit for his endeavors. Craig's final and particularly characteristic idea,

as set down in his book, 'The Art Theatre,' is to give plays which shall require the use of no spoken words, but which shall be entirely comprehensible through the medium of line, mass, color, movement, and music.

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